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THE SEA EMPRESS'S GARDEN

By

Brandon Dyer

B.F.A., University of Louisville, 2007

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Fine Arts

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT

THE SEA EMPRESS'S GARDEN

Brandon Joel Dyer

December 3, 2013

The thesis project is projected to be a grand storybook of handmade intaglio prints in a large format. I have created an original fable telling the story of a flawed hero who must face his fears in order to not only save his love and her empire from an evil warlock but to save himself. Through these hand painted prints, the story of The Sea Empress's Garden is told and the choices these characters must make and experience the consequences. The work is motivated by the inspiration I draw from German Expressionism, illuminated manuscripts, popular culture, and literature both modern and old. It is a combination of trying to capture what it was like when I was a child and influenced from my years of personal experience. I feel there is a certain childlike playfulness and fearfulness in each of my pieces that may hide something good or something sinister in nature.

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INTRODUCTION

The prints presented in this exhibition are the result of a lifetime of stories, education, and life experiences both positive and negative. My first artistic pieces were not narrative but rather landscape paintings created under the instruction of my grandmother Dottie, a painter. I did not start doodling stories until after my grandmother's early death, which greatly affected everyone in the family. As a six year old I felt isolated from my family and my peers. I imagined, this isolation as similar to Charlie Brown's brick wall. The one he often talked to in some of the Peanuts comic strips. I would try to escape my isolation by creating stories, reading books (scientific, factual, fairy tales, Greek/Roman Mythology, Bible stories, novels, comic books, comic strips, etc.), playing video games, playing with my action figures, watching movies (Disney, Looney Tunes, etc.) etc. I drew with ink in spiral notebooks and made up stories involving a large dog fighting off ninja mailmen, an evil computer chip, and various other adversaries. One of the only things I had from my grandmother Dottie was an old "how to" book on animation and some elements of how to tell a story fluently. I would often look through this book and marvel at the instructions on how to make an animation table or how to get an action across more fluently by means of lines and posture. Each "story" would be kept to one page and advancement would be drawing the characters onto different parts of the scene or page to where by the end, it would look like scribbles and the story would be lost to even me. I would also doodle

pictures of my favorite story characters like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, dragons from various tales, Disney characters and Garfield.

I was known as an artist in grammar school and during 5th grade my art teacher had me create clay sculptures of Noah's Ark. I enjoyed doing this since I was excused from recess and Physical Education classes so I could work on the clay sculptures. Recess and PE were always my least favorite subjects because it exposed me to the cruelties of the other children. Being able to escape those classes for the time being was very liberating. As an undergraduate in college, art again became my refuge and strength. When I took advanced painting, I started to include story elements back into my work. I kept a realistic style and was influenced by contemporaries such as the comic artist Alex Ross who would paint characters as they would appear in the real world. At that time, I would pick up action figures from my collection or hunt for used ones from stores and rearrange them into historical paintings such as *The School of Athens* and *Liberty Leading the People*. I discovered, however, that I missed my childhood way of drawing and painting. This caused me to simplify my style but keep a more sophisticated presentation, flow, placement, etc. This also allowed me to bring in other interests of mine such as anime, American cartoons, fairy tale illustrators from the early 1900s (Arthur Rackham), and Vertigo's *Fables*. The transition from painting to printmaking was the next logical step. I felt printmaking worked with my art best because of the potential of multiple images being made and circulated and bound. Furthermore, I felt I was more of an illustrator than a painter and printmaking seemed the best way to convey my work.

I have thought about why I have picked dry-point engravings as my process of choice and it is basically because I am most familiar with line work. I mentioned that after my grandmother died when I was a child, I had few options available to me to express myself through art. My family members are not artists and that limited me to a pencil or ink pen and spiral notebooks bought from a “Back to School” sale from a store like Wal-Mart or Target. So my work would be of mostly linear drawings of figures, some of popular characters and mostly my own. So when I eventually discovered printmaking, dry-point engravings seemed like a perfect fit for me. This is because the transfer of these images onto paper looked like my drawings without much compromise. With other ways of making art, I felt there were too many compromises I had to make in order for me to create my work. For example, when I painted with oil paints, too often than not I would end up with a painting that did not look the way I imagined. The painting would not represent exactly what I wanted from paper sketch to the painted canvas; there would be a distortion that happened along the way. While I am not the best at realistic drawings and paintings, I did not at that time, like that my paintings seem to deviate so much from what I was aiming for and appear to represent a different mood and style. I eventually overcame this and started to study pieces by Germanic Expressionists such as Max Beckmann and drew inspiration and guidance on how to work with this deviation instead of working against it. I have embraced my distortions and the lack of precision of the figures and scenery. Now I feel I have found a perfect translation with dry-point

engraving prints. I no longer feel the pressure of making things look how others believe they should but make them look how I believe they should look.

PROCESS

My work is dry-point engraving, an intaglio printing process. I use an etching needle and scratch into the surface of an acrylic plastic plate or commercially known as Plexiglas. Once I am done scratching my drawing, which is attached underneath onto the plate, I ink it up and print it off onto a piece of cream color Rives BFK paper. The ink on the plate goes into the grooves created by the scratch marks and then I wipe off the excessive ink with a tarlatan and run it through a press with the piece of paper over the plate. The ink from the grooves transfers onto the paper and that is how an intaglio print is created. I wait for the ink to dry for a few days and then I will paint over the print with watercolors.

I apply watercolor to most of my prints after the ink has dried. I do this for a few reasons. I enjoy color and while I have a great respect for black and white pieces (and will sometimes make some work without color), I feel my work is strongest in color because of animation and story books being one of my influences in my artwork, which use color for both decorative and function. In animation and story books, the colors are usually very vivid and bright, I try to emulate this in my prints but do try to tone them down when the situation requires for it. Color is another tool used in telling a story. For example, a scene that is painted with dark colors will convey a somber mood to a viewer. One of my prints

that conveys a somber mood is *The Tears of the Ambassador*, where the central figure is enshrouded in darks and very little hits of light. I limit my colors to twelve or fewer in each print to keep the color from being too confusing and contrasting with many of the elements that appear in each of my prints. If I use too many colors, I risk overloading the viewer with too much information and I want viewers to be at impressed first at what they see but then with further inspection they are rewarded with all the tiny details I may put into one piece. Since I do limit my colors, I have to think creatively to make sure I am not printing too monotone. I make sure the same colors are not close to each other, but sometimes that is unavoidable. Some of the ways I prevent my pieces from being too monotone is by glazing and blending colors together to create some contrast even when a figure may have the same base color. The end result I hope to create is a print with colors that are impressive at first and then reward those that look further into the details of the colors I have added within each area.

I have made lithographic prints, copper plate etchings, and archival pigment prints. Most of these prints were created because of my curiosity for printmaking and its variety of processes involved. I found printing off a lithographic limestone too unpredictable and I did not get acceptable results. Metal plate lithographic print is made by being very mindful of not contaminating the metal with by touching the surface with something greasy like your fingers. Once I have drawn my image, I etch it by spreading a mixture of gum arabic and acid across the plate. You let that set for a few minutes and then buff it off with cheese cloth. Generally, you need two people to print from this plate; one to help

keep the plate wet and the other to roll ink over the plate's surface. Once a plate is inked, paper can be placed over the plate and it is passed through a lithographic press. I will also watercolor these images. Lithographs are not a large part of my Master of Art show and the reason is because, I felt the crayon did not meet my standards for linear mark making when compared to the solid lines I found with dry-point engravings.

Another piece in my show was printed by a different intaglio process using copper-plate etching with aquatint, dry point, and sugar lift. Again, I created this particular print out of curiosity for other printmaking processes that were not dry-point engraving and to keep my options open in case I found another process more enjoyable or better. Copper-plate etching is similar to the process of dry points and is printed in the same fashion. The etching is created by taking a copper plate that has been degreased and covering it with a hard ground then letting that dry on the plate. I then take an etching needle and remove the ground where I want lines to be made upon the plate. Once I have my plate ready, I will then put it in acid and let it etch into the copper for about an hour or more. It is taken out of the acid and the rest of the hard ground is removed. At this point, the plate can be printed as my dry-point engravings are or I can do further things to it like aquatint, sugar lift, or even dry point, all three of which I do on this particular print in my show. Aquatint is made by letting dust-like resin to settle on the plate; then it is fused onto the plate by heating it. This process will allow you to have different degrees of shading on your plate, from light grays to blacks, depending on how long you leave it in the acid. This process can be unpredictable at times

and results vary depending on a number of factors like acid strength and how much resin is fused on the plate. The process can be very beautiful if done correctly or very frustrating if results are different than expected. Since I am someone who can tolerate some unpredictable accidents, but feel safer with more predictability, I found this process not exactly for me. Also while I can watercolor these prints, I find I rather enjoy the darks and the grays and feel hesitant to add my colors to a print displaying a well done aquatint for fear it would distract from an already beautiful process.

An additional process I have used in my show is archival pigment printing. This is taking a digitally created piece and printing it from an archival inkjet printer. I have in the past been reluctant to create pieces in this way but over the last two or three years I have grown to like this process more and more. As I have stated before, I like seeing an almost perfect transfer of my work to print and find digital printing as this to be desirable when I want to do something more precise, like making a map for the end papers in the book. I am still developing from these works in progress and I am also seeing more and more in this type of digital artwork, as are many of us these days. I am further exposed to it because I am a fan of animation and spend a lot of time on the internet looking at other people's work, which is mostly digital. While this map is an archival pigment print, I created it from a smaller drawing that I had enlarged to sixteen by thirty-two inches and then printed. I proceeded to color this printout with watercolor and then it was digitally photographed. I finally printed it on an archival inkjet printer. I feel this works best for my need for more than one print for front and back of the

book. I did not want to deal with a plate that size if I chose to make it through something like dry-point engraving.

Another challenge I had while trying to create this show was to add text to theon prints that would tell the story of my narrative art pieces. I wanted to create and reproduce a font style of my own in a way that made it look like it was inspired by the script in illuminated manuscripts. I experimented with a number of techniques and processes. A typecast printer was not available to me but that would still not solve the problem of making it emulate a certain handwritten style. I experimented with dry-point engraving at first but found that it was too hard on my hands to scratch-in each word onto a plate and there was a risk of my hand slipping and ruining the whole plate. I found that what was printed, while acceptable, did not look like the handwritten and unique text I wanted in a story page. I moved on to screen printing and at first was not satisfied with the line quality until I was able to find the right type of pen to help me make a stencil that would display the unique font I created for this art book. In screen printing, I take a paper that has a section of my story on it and secure semitransparent vellum over it. Then I take a pen and recreate this text in my own unique font on the vellum. Once I am done with the velum, I take it to a light table to be exposed to a screen covered in photo-sensitive emulsion. Once the screen is exposed to light, I clean it off and my text is now a stencil that I can then use to print the image on paper. The result is very close to what I wanted: a font on paper that is printed but looks handwritten because the screen emulated the variations of the pressure of my pen, both light and heavy, on the print.

STORY AND INFLUENCES

I have created a fable telling the story of a flawed hero who must face his fears in order to not only save his love and her empire from an evil warlock but to save himself. Through these hand-painted prints, both the story of *The Sea Empress's Garden* is told and the choices these characters must make and their consequences. As in other fables, there is a basic lesson to be learned in my fable: One's decisions can affect people one must deal with them the best he knows how to even when he feels like running the other way.

In my M.A. show the fable draws influence from many fairy tales especially the Grimm Brother's "The Frog King," which has been my favorite tale over the years. As a child, I seemed to be drawn to it because, unlike others, the prince was not handsome initially because, when the princess first meets him, he is of course a frog. The princess is repulsed by him and it is up to the prince to win her heart and get the kiss that turns him back into a man. I often possessed various books and movies based on this tale, such as, Jim Henson's tale involving the Muppets. I remember reading as a kid another version that portrayed the frog as being rejected by the princess and him going on a journey to find a princess of his same species. It also seems this theme was always in my subconscious: I always liked the odd heroes found in Nintendo games, such as Mario, Link from Legend of Zelda, or Samus Aran from Metroid, or in movies, such as Disney's

The Rescuers, The Great Mouse Detective, etc., where the hero was small or did not look the hero type but was able to win the day or the princess. Such themes often come up in my artwork to show there is hope for even the odd, if they are still good at heart.

Recently my subject matter has turned to the ocean and the fantastical. I have depicted scenes with sea creatures of real life and legend or things I create in my mind. I choose to do this because I feel the ocean underneath still possesses that dark mystery of untamed innocence that seems to be lost everywhere else. I also credit this interest to the time when I was a teenager and often read books by H. G. Wells and Jules Verne. I remember reading H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and marveled about the story and how people thought the future would work, drawing on their limited knowledge of time travel. In the case of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* by Verne, their knowledge of deep-sea ocean travel would be like is imagined upon. These two authors were not afraid to explore the mysteries of the unknown and report them through stories of their own. The ocean similarly is still a mystery to our society. Living in Southern Indiana, I rarely have seen the ocean and therefore it is more of a mystery to me than for most people who may live or travel there often. My story attempts to create a place similar to what Wells or Verne would describe but I would create it from my own vision, my fantasies, from factual knowledge that I know about what is in the oceans, and from the fables and stories I have read.

I have had multiple influences on my work's appearance: from anime, from traditional turn-of-the-century illustrators like Arthur Rackham, as well as comic

book artists. But I feel the major influence on my work is that of the German Expressionists especially Max Beckmann in the early nineteenth century. Looking at this type of art movement helped me realize that my work in undergraduate studies did not have to be ultrarealistic. I could deviate from realism yet not go as far as Cubism in breaking down the figure and scenery around it. I was given an assignment by my painting instructor during the second to last semester of my undergraduate career: do a painting using my own subject matter, but do it in the style and painting of Max Beckmann. For whatever reason, he saw this particular painter's style in my realistic comic book subject based paintings. I researched Beckmann's work and ultimately decided on his *Girl with the Yellow Cat* and switched the girl with the comic character Harley Quinn and her pet hyena as the cat. I decided to focus on trying to capture both what it was like when I was a child and early influences. I feel there should be a certain childlike playfulness and fearfulness in each of my pieces that may hide something good or something sinister in nature, the same feelings I got when I first viewed Beckmann's painting.

INDIVIDUAL PIECES

This work is a narrative piece. Throughout the works, the viewer will notice that certain characters, places, and things will appear multiple times in my effort to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. As a result, the completed work will be a very large fable art book. I will analyze three pieces that will help clarify the significance these works.

First I will go over what will eventually be my endpapers for my book; it is a large digital map of the area where the narrative take place. The title of this piece is called, *Map of the Bryarcoral Empire, Endpapers* (Figure 2). One of the biggest influences on me during my teenage years was J. R. R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and later on, The Lord of the Rings. In the hardcover versions of these works, their endpapers would always be a map of where the heroes would be traveling over. I found such a map to be helpful in getting an idea where everything is located. Another reason I made the map is my long involvement in adventure and role-playing video games where vast worlds are created and explored. It was always helpful to be able to look at the map within the game to find where I wanted to go or figure out where I was. I want to recreate that same a viewer looking at my map being used to explore the narrative with a more complete and active experience.

The border around the map is modeled on medieval maps which would often fill their borders with images of monsters or items used for navigation. My map was drawn from the perspective of a human character in my fable and from how they would interpret this part of the ocean full of sea creatures, wonders and intelligent life. So I imagined these humans would note the unusual plant and wildlife, such as Heart's Remembrance Flowers, or the odd dress of the royal guards and the alluring power emanating from Bryarcoral's trident. The perspective of the map is from above and not made with exact measurements and tools. I wanted a map that was not made by a cartographer, but by someone who needed only general relationships to note where everything was generally located for future reference.

Within the book there are dry point images of various scenes that happen. One of these images is *Hidden in the Shell* (Figure 4), a scene that happens early in the story. Here the two heroes, Dolphinsorrow and Dylan are still an infant and a toddler and are hiding inside a large shell in a vast field of sea flowers called Heart's Remembrance. They are hiding from the warlock, a giant squid-like creature on the upper right corner of this picture. At this point in the fable, I wanted the warlock to be a bit mysterious and partially cut off by the page so that the viewer only sees his jagged mouth and tentacles floating over the flowers. I decided for the nemesis to be a squid like creature because of images of a giant kraken attacking ships in illustrations and causing distress among those that sailed the seas early in human naval history. I have found that there seems to be a rivalry between squids and mermaids and mermen. In a painting

by William A. Breakspeare entitled *The Mermaid* we see a mermaid clinging to a rock to avoid a squid that may have evil or curious intentions. This painting and others further affirmed my idea that a squid should be the main enemy and a threat to both the sea people and humans alike in my story.

A dry point of mine that expresses fear similar to that showed by the mermaid in the Breakspeare painting is *The Capture of Dolphinsorrow* (Figure 10). Here the viewer will see the Empress Dolphinsorrow at an older age than she was in *Hidden in the Shell* and trying to defend a turtle-pulled wagon full of her injured soldiers from a battle that happens in the story. The warlock appears again in this scene and Dolphinsorrow and everyone else in the scene are overcome by terror as they are overwhelmed by the warlock's gigantic tentacles and his minions, the fear fish. I wanted the feeling of no escape and the full effect of the warlock to be on display in this scene. Unlike the earlier image, the warlock's face is fully seen and more of his body is everywhere. I wanted to convey the emotions of being overwhelmed, being scared to inaction, and of hopelessness in such a situation. These emotions are felt often by people working toward an uncertain goal and a future that will probably not end happily ever after.

I feel the female role in fairy tales and fables is often reactive, with the result that women just goes along with what happens around them and do not attempt to change their fate despite their wishes for something else. In *The Capture of Dolphinsorrow*, while she will be captured by the warlock, she also tries to prevent that from happening with a spear that was ready to strike before

terror overtook her. In tales like Cinderella, the female role is powerless in her social stature while Dolphinsorrow is royal and eventually an empress with all the powers granted to her to rule the empire she inherits. I did not want her to be a flawless heroine and wanted someone the viewer could see develop and grow as the narrative went on to its conclusion.

CONCLUSION

I wanted my narrative piece to feel like a grand storybook, something someone would see at the beginning of some of the older Disney fairytale movies. I wanted this storybook to be of great size and full of images and character with every word. As I have stated in a previous chapter, I drew inspiration from illuminated manuscripts to accomplish this effect. I looked at various examples of pages from actual illuminated manuscripts and noticed they were not neatly penned and often the text would bleed off the page. I wanted to imitate this imprecision as if it were written with a pen, but still be able to go back anytime and duplicate them. The solution I came up with was to use silkscreen and make a stencil from a piece of velum I wrote on with an opaque pen. The effect I got can be found on the page entitled *The Sea Empress's Garden: Chapter One, Page One* (Figure 1). Here I was able to create the effects I wanted of a handwritten style that had light and dark lines as if they were being written with a pen. On other pages, I printed over the border in a way similar to actual manuscripts I viewed and this further enhances the look that it was created by human hands instead of done through other means. Finally, I noticed that in many manuscripts every paragraph's first letter was decorated and illuminated. While I experimented with using gold leaf, I ultimately decided to represent each paragraph's first letter with an illustration shaped similarly like the letter it represents.

The layout of *The Sea Empress's Garden: Chapter One, Page One*, not only tells the story through texts, but also include aspects and images of the story within the borders as well as within the texts. Within the borders I include characters that are involved in each chapter. We can see Dolphinsorrow being carried away by Dylan in the center of the bottom border. We can see the Warlock on the left side, see Dolphinsorrow's parents on the right side, and see the black seed spreading its roots and spreading its corruption throughout the border. The illustrations in column divider also tell a simplified story of the main one and in the first chapter I decided to represent it by illustrating dolphins and whales acting out what's going on within each page.

REFERENCES

No references cited.



Figure 1: *The Sea Empress's Garden*, Cover, 18"x14", lithograph.



Figure 2: Map of the Bryargoral Empire, 20"x32", archival pigment print.



Figure 3: Chapter 1, Page 1 of Sea Empress's Garden, 16"x20", dry point.



Figure 4: *Hidden in the Shell*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 5: *Cowering like a Crab*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 6: *Attack of the Sea Serpent*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 7: *Ambushed at the Fire Crevice*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 8: *Relighting the Fire Fountain*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 9: *Battle at Siren's Last Kiss*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 10: *The Capture of Dolphinsorrow*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.



Figure 11: *The Tears of the Ambassador*, 16"x20", dry point and watercolor.

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